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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8876
RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 0399
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1362
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1540
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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SUBJECT: ERITREAN ORTHODOX CHURCH CONSECRATES NEW PATRIARCH

¶1. On Sunday May 27, the Eritrean Orthodox Tewhado Church consecrated Abune Dioskoros in Asmara as the church's fourth patriarch. Present at the ceremony were representatives from the Evangelical Lutheran church and the Eritrean mufti, and representatives of the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE), including Yemane Ghebremeskel of the Office of the President and the Minister of Defense, General Sebhat Efrem. Because of the controversy surrounding Abune Dioskoros' appointment as patriarch, most in the diplomatic community refused to attend the ceremony. Despite an understanding by the European Commission Heads of Mission that no one would go to the event, the French Deputy Chief of Mission attended. The Egyptian Deputy Chief of Mission also attended due to the historic ties between the Egyptian Coptic and Eritrean Orthodox churches.

¶2. Abune Dioskoros, who has served as the de facto patriarch of the church since the previous patriarch Abune Antonios was removed in January 2006, was elected unanimously by the Holy Synod April 19. Abune Antonios remains under house arrest in Asmara with his movements strictly controlled by the GSE. He is reportedly in ill-health and being denied medical attention. While the Eritrean Orthodox Church lay administrator Yoftahe Demetrios, appointed by the GSE in mid-2005, continues to assert that the former patriarch was removed for (unspecified) heretical acts, many of the faithful believe his removal was actually tied to his efforts to modernize the church and increase outreach to the youth. Others link Antonios' removal more specifically to his refusal in 2005 to excommunicate members of the liberal and popular Medhane Alem congregation at the request of the GSE. To date, at least three members of the Medhane Alem congregation continue to be held in prison without charge or due process.

¶3. Comment: The consecration ceremony of Abune Dioskoros was unremarkable, and occurred with no open opposition from the Eritrean Orthodox Church congregation. End Comment.

Bionote

¶4. Born in 1935, Abune Dioskoros joined Abune Abranios Monastery at the age of 15 where he received religious education. He has been acting as the de facto patriarch since January 2006.

MCINTYRE